The Daily Astorian—BILL WAGNER

The story of Tongue Point

The former naval air station on the east side of Tongue Point lies virtually idle while state and local officials wrangle over how the site can be put to use.

The area has been the scene of similar wrangling throughout its long history; wrangling interrupted by short periods of fever-pitch activity.

Astorians gave the area to the U.S. Navy long ago, and the state bought it back from the federal government for $2.1 million just weeks ago.

Development by the Navy, even during the days of the buildup for World War II, proceeded slowly with more than a fair measure of bureaucratic hurdles and shortages of funding.

Bob Lucas, a distinguished newspaperman who was an Astorian-Budget staff member for a part of his career, recounts the facility's history in an article beginning on Page 5.

The story of Tongue Point

By Bob Lucas

Editor's Note: The state Emergency Board recently approved purchase by the State Land Board of land and facilities at Tongue Point, for $2,123,000. The property, which had been declared surplus by the U.S. General Services Administration, involves 148.7 acres; a large building used as a hangar by the Navy in World War II, a smaller building, a concrete dock area of 23.58 acres, and five reinforced concrete piers ranging in length from 1,297 to 1,457 feet.

There is additional property upriver, used by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which the state hopes to acquire.

The Land Board is seeking clients for lease of the land and facilities purchased this year. The board has asked the Lower Columbia River Development Task Force, appointed by the governor this year, to assist with finding uses for the property.

Development of Tongue Point began at the turn of the century. In this article, Bob Lucas, a former resident of Astoria, relates the history of Tongue Point, an area which has been described by maritime experts as one of the best sites on the Pacific Coast for water-related development.

Initial work at Tongue Point in 1921 soon stopped. Nothing more was done until World War II broke out.

Columbia River Maritime Museum

By August 1947, Tongue Point was home for hundreds of landing ships, minesweepers and patrol craft. Landing craft were stowed piggyback style on the big LSTs.

Eighty years ago, a Rear Admiral Bradford and a naval board of inquiry recommended that a "harbor of refuge and repair" be established by the United States government at Tongue Point.

Seventeen years passed before further action on Tongue Point took place.

At the outbreak of World War I, a second naval board of inquiry — this was headed by Rear Admiral J.M. Helm — surveyed sites for a naval facility at Portland, St. Helens, Vancouver and Astoria.

The Helm board chose 240 acres at Tongue Point, owned by the Columbia Land Improvement Co. which was asking $75,000 for the site. The board recommended that the government pay up to $60,000 for the acreage, develop a "submarine and aviation" base on it, and commit not more than $1.2 million for its construction.

In 1919 Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels visited Astoria aboard the battleship Vermont to inspect Tongue Point and gave its development his endorsement.

Later that same year another board of survey, this one known as the Parks-McKean board of inspection, concurred in the Helm study. But this board recommended a larger site extending to the mouth of the John Day River. It proposed a facility that would base 12 submarines, six destroyers and support aircraft for patrol of the waters in the vicinity of the Columbia River.

Republican C.N. "Pat" McArthur, then a congressman from Portland and a high-ranking member of the House naval affairs committee, was successful in adding $250,000 to the general Navy bill to begin development. The appropriation was passed March 4, 1920.

But a hitch developed in controversy over the price of the land and the Navy asked that the land be given to the government as a "gift." (Sen. Charles L. McNary later told the Senate that this marked the first time on record that the government had asked a community to furnish a free site for a naval base).

Leaders of Astoria recognized that to purchase the site through taxation for a gift to the government would have to await a special election. They felt action was needed immediately.

The Astoria Chamber of Commerce organized a committee to borrow from the local banks $100,000 to buy the 371 acres required. The loan was secured by individual notes of business houses and individuals in amounts of $25 to $1,000. And in the general election later that year the voters of Clatsop County taxed themselves for that amount to liquidate the notes.

On May 27, 1921, the deed for the 371 acres of Tongue Point land was ceremoniously presented to Admiral Kuenzli, commandant of the Bremerton Navy Yard.

Victor Kee Collection—Columbia River Maritime Museum

Civilians viewed some of Tongue Point Naval Air Station's 24 patrol bomber seaplanes on Navy Day 1935.

Victor Kee Collection—Columbia River Maritime Museum

Dredging began in April 1940 to make the Naval Air Station suitable for storage of mothballed vessels. Dredge pipelines carried spoils to what became Mott Island.

Contracts were awarded for dredging of the Tongue Point basin, for the leveling of uplands and for the construction of wharves and finger piers.

Building was abruptly halted soon thereafter, however, for lack of appropriations; and Oregon's representative on the naval affairs committee, Rep. McArthur, was defeated for re-election during the Ku Klux Klan hysteria of 1922.

In 1923 another naval board of inquiry, this one headed by Admiral Rodman, found Tongue Point "ill adapted as an operating base for submarines and destroyers" and recommended it be used only as a "harbor" for a mobile force of such craft.

In 1925, Sen. Frederick Steiwer introduced [illegible] to reimburse the taxpayers of Clatsop County for the money they had voted for Tongue Point. The Steiwer bill passed the Senate almost unanimously but died without action in the House.

In 1934, an Astoria merchant, Abraham Shapiro, visited the office of Merle R. Chessman, editor and publisher of the Asterian-Budget. He urged the newspaper to revive the campaign for a naval base at Tongue Point — pointing out that it was justified both as a defense facility and as a source of employment for Depression-suffering Astorians.

Chessman asked Shapiro to write a letter to the editor restating his case. Chessman followed up the letter with an editorial, "Strike for the Naval Base." This launched a struggle that eventually involved the whole state in an appeal for a more equitable share of the billions Congress was voting for West Coast defenses.

A "Counsel of Defense" was organized by the Portland Chamber of Commerce. This later became the Columbia Defense League with Portland's Major Everett Stretcher as chairman, Chessman as vice chairman and Walter Nelson, secretary of the Astoria Chamber of Commerce, as secretary.

The Clatsop County Commission, then comprised of Guy Boyington, James Elliot and Billy Larson, included money in the county budget to prosecute the campaign for Tongue Point on the claim that county taxpayer money had been invested in it, with little return.

In the course of the six-year campaign, Chessman made five trips to Washington, D.C., each of six to eight weeks in duration.

In 1938, City Attorney James L. Hope and Chessman, along with Sen. McNary, gained a 35-minute audience with President Roosevelt to present the case for Tongue Point.

Chessman later wrote that the president said

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Tongue Point

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the nation "should have a base at Tongue Point for a patrol fleet which could be fully utilized upon two weeks notice." Hope and Chessman asked Roosevelt if he would communicate such a plan to Admiral Leahy, chief of naval operations. The president said he would do so.

McNary, Hope and Chessman rushed to Admiral Leahy with the news.

After cooling his heels in Washington for two weeks, awaiting further word from Leahy, Chessman asked for an appointment with Leahy but was told that he (Leahy) "did not find FDR in the attitude that was presented" by McNary, Hope and Chessman. So Astoria's hopes for Tongue Point were dashed again.

With the Astoria newspaper taking the lead, others of Oregon's newspapers joined in the cry of "discrimination" against Oregon in matters of "defense expenditures." It was pointed out that Oregon received less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the $264,774,000 expended by Congress on West Coast shore defenses.

In 1939, the fifth naval board of inquiry to look at Tongue Point visited Astoria. This one was headed by Rear Admiral A.J. Hepburn. Issued on Dec. 1, the Hepburn board's report on the development of Tongue Point was adverse.

But a House subcommittee on naval affairs also visited Tongue Point and strongly recommended the construction of a naval air station there. By this time, the case for defense of the "Columbia River Empire" was being spearheaded not only by Northwest citizens but also by Republican Congressman James W. Mott who represented the 4th Congressional District and was a senior member of the naval affairs committee.

The Tongue Point appropriation, despite the negative Navy recommendation, was all but sneaked through the House debate. Mott and his colleagues chose instead to let the House argue about a controversial proposal to fortify Guam. The Tongue Point item was unchallenged. The appropriation sailed through the Senate where it was recognized as the prestigious McNary's "baby."

The first commandant of the Tongue Point Naval Air Station was Comm. George E. Hasselman, a veteran naval fighter pilot and once a member of the navy's famed stunt flying team, the Blue Angels.

Hasselman worked furiously to build the Tongue Point station. By January 1943, the "Information and Statistical Directory" compiled by the 13th Naval District described Tongue Point as the base for 229 officers housed in two bachelor officers' quarters; barracks for 1,585 enlisted men; storage for 700,000 gallons of aviation gasoline; 1,350,000 square feet of concrete aprons sufficient for handling 48 patrol bombers; a combined motion picture theater and gym for 1,000; six bowling alleys in the barracks and home for two 12-plane squadrons of patrol aircraft.

But when a PBY plane struck a huge log while attempting a takeoff from the Tongue Point basin during a spring freshet in the Columbia and the plane's crew was lost, the function of Tongue Point was abruptly changed.

The air station became primarily a maintenance and repair facility for naval aircraft and an auxiliary facility for the greater naval activity at Astoria's port docks and airport.

In 1945, at the war's close, Tongue Point was redesigned as a "naval station" for the mothballing of 500 surplus navy vessels.

In 1946 the Tongue Point basin was dredged to a depth of 15 to 35 feet, 4,000 feet long and 1,750 feet wide. The basin was connected with the main Columbia River channel by a corridor 500 feet wide and 25 feet deep.

The initial 371 acres comprising the naval station had become 743 acres upon redesign of the facility for ship moorage. In 1964 Tongue Point became a Job Corps training center within the Office of Economic Opportunity. In 1971 the property was transferred to the Department of Labor which continues to operate it as a center for basic education and vocational courses involving some 500 young people ranging in age from 16 to 21.

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(Early in a distinguished newspaper career, Bob Lucas was a reporter for the Astorian-Budget. Subsequently, he was managing editor and editor of the Yakima Herald and Republic; managing editor and editor of the Denver Post; editor of the Hartford Times and chief of the Washington bureau of Gannett newspapers. He and Mrs. Lucas, the former Peggy Chessman of Astoria, live in retirement at Black Butte).